

# Indirect exposure to argumentative genre: a methodological approach to improving thesis statements (The case of Kosovo first semester undergraduate students)

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DOI: 10.18355/XL.2023.16.02.15

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was threefold: (a) to create an original student corpus of the argumentative writings of first-year undergraduate students; (b) to describe the differences among student writing (with a focus on thesis statements) at two stages of the first semester, based on essays obtained at two different times; (c) to investigate the effectiveness of indirect instruction of argumentative writing during the first semester. The results of the study indicate that there were slight differences in the effectiveness of the indirect instruction, which included introducing argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions. The results further indicate that the writings of stage one and stage two, respectively, were not notably different when it came to composing a thesis statement. Relatively few students included a sentence to resemble the structure and function of a thesis statement. The findings of this study reveal that students are not aware of certain linguistic patterns present in written argumentation. It is obvious from the study that in order for students to create thesis statements, which is an inevitable argumentative writing skill in academia, Needs-based Learning should be integrated across the implemented methods of teaching. The results have implications for the syllabus and course materials.

**Key words:** argumentation, thesis statement, writing, methodology, instruction, learner corpora

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## 1. Introduction

As crucial it is for a teacher to move to the role of a researcher in order to work towards students' progress, as delicate and complex it is. The difficulties lie in identifying the students' problems and deciding upon a method to approach them, which speaks for the fact that the methodological aspect cannot be separated from the linguistic one.

By assembling a learner corpus prior to and following the introduction of writing samples and free writing exercises, the local researcher of this study aspired to analyze differences in student argumentative writings, focusing on the thesis statements by providing original and reliable data as research results.

It is vital in today's world to be able to make good arguments. Kuhn (1991) considered argumentation to be a thinking skill essential to idea formulation, problem-solving, and good judgment. Thus, it is rightly considered to be central in the world of education and research.

Inappropriately, due to its complex and demanding nature, argumentative writing is often avoided, and most language courses are focused on other skills or composing only general text. This is why argumentative writing skill remains underdeveloped, though it serves as a crucial tool for students (McCann, 1989). While most Kosovar elementary schools evade argumentative writing tasks, and secondary schools try to avoid argumentative writing skills until the last year, argumentative writing is hardly acquired by university students in their first year, a fact also agreed by McCann.

When students begin their studies, they enter an academic community and are brought in contact with different types of texts. Being conscious of their genres will aid the understanding and interpretation of those texts. In these academic communities, there are certain commonalities in academic discourse, so core skills can and should be

present (Bloor & Bloor, 1986). Thus, Hyland (2007) states that genre is the term that is used to refer to grouping those texts together and representing how academics use language to respond to recurring situations.

The key term in academic discourse is argumentation. Academic discourse is an argument in itself. Argumentation is the act of forming reasons, making inductions, drawing conclusions and applying them to the case in discussion (Hyland, 2004). It can be said to be an analysis on its own. Being a carefully arranged and supported presentation of a viewpoint, it mostly leads to earning the audiences' consideration of one's perspective (Irvin, 2010).

As a mode of academic discourse, argumentation constitutes an important part of learners' academic experience. Because of the widespread presence of this genre in the academic curriculum, a common component of language classes consists of instructing argumentative writing skills (Braaksma, 2002).

The difficulties faced by language students when asked to produce a piece of text are often due to an inadequate understanding of how texts are organized, which is also the case with Argumentative Essays (Swales, 1984). Via gaining argumentation skills, students start to accept the existence of others' positions, get ready for high-stakes assessments and get prepared for the real world. Argumentation is said to be the number one for students in academia. As argumentation requires investigation and collection, generation and evaluation of evidence, it is thought to be one of the genres, the features of which are applicable to many others (Hillocks, 2010).

An inevitable term when being confronted with academic and, specifically, argumentative discourse is the thesis statement. Aaron (1989) very briefly describes the thesis statement as the take-home message you want the reader to remember. Unfortunately, this concise definition of a thesis statement is not in concord with its complexity in form and meaning. Because a thesis statement clearly states what the essay is about, it guides the reader through the manifestation of ideas in order to help make sense of what the writer is saying (Waddell, 2004). Without the thesis statement, the writer will wander through incoherent thoughts and will lose the audience. Thus, the more precise the thesis statement is, the more organized and clear the supporting evidence will be. Requiring such a precise structure and nature, sometimes the thesis statement needs to be reorganized while the research work evolves, as the original ideas may change in the process (Karper, 2002).

With regard to the Kosovar setting, it should be emphasized that one cannot speak English as a first language but rather consider the factors deriving as a result of English having the featuring status of a second language.

Second Language Acquisition is a field of study that comprises a set of complex issues. Despite students' cultural awareness, there is also linguistic awareness which speaks for understanding L1 and L2 differences in order to make correct judgments in using language (Ammar, Lightbown, & Spada, 2010). This does not speak for constant usage of L1 in the process of L2 acquisition; but rather for L1 support in L2 acquisition (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). On the other hand, avoiding L1 environment and being under L2 educational medium has also proven to result in acquisition progress (Storch, 2009). All these lead to the fact that both learner characteristics and learners' conditions have a great impact in the process of second language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Despite the students' acquisition perspective, there is the teaching perspective as well. Second Language Teaching is an extremely sensitive field to be dealt with. Both sides, especially the teachers, should start to understand, analyze and ideally adapt to learners' specific requirements (Bracaj, 2014). The analysis of these specific needs results in the necessity for multidisciplinary means of study - a way to enhance student engagement (Stebleton, Jensen, & Peter, 2010).

The most complex skill to be acquired in second language acquisition on an academic level is writing. When it comes to it, various questions arise in order to understand the area of study: How is L2 writing different from L1 writing? Is there any methodological role in the process of L2 acquisition? What is the role of this skill in the classroom? What is the purpose of student products in class? (Reichelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert & Schultz, 2012). When it comes to L2 users of English, they can be obviously distinguished from L1 users of English mainly because of lexical and structural differences between L1 and L2 (Crossley & McNamara, 2009). Considering these differences, learners tend to use L1 during L2 production, a fact that is negatively related to L2 text quality (Weijen, Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Sanders, 2009). In the whole process of acquisition, second/foreign language context (Manchon, 2009) and forms (Cook & Bassetti, 2005; Flowerdew, 2009) appear to be pivotal. As far as the context is concerned, focusing on the purpose of usage (Harmer, 2004) is inevitable. One should also consider learners' knowledge, personality and environment as factors influencing L2 products.

What all the above-mentioned share is the common interest to identify learners' existing competence in order to set a base for better acquisition. It is important to know that classroom research is not library research. It involves people in order to improve their skills, techniques and strategies. As important it is to know why we do things, the more important it is to know what we do and how to do them better - in order to impact students positively (Ferrance, 2000). Thus, teachers need to think systematically and implement new views where improvements are possible (Burns, 2005). The attitude of inquiry a teacher-researcher should possess in order to follow a process of gathering information, analyzing and using the outcomes of analysis to take some action (Stinger, Christensen, & Baldwin, 2009) is a leading feature towards the development in the field of acquiring academic discourse. Pedagogical research is always focused on students and understanding students' understanding. It emerges from teachers' worries. The professional knowledge gained from this research allows teachers to be autonomous researchers rather than follow prescribed traditions (Castle, 2006).

The present study draws on the research practice of Discourse Analysis with the application of Corpora under methodological instructions in order to provide a theoretically and methodologically sound framework for the examination and reflection of students' problems in the light of experience and theoretical knowledge. Not only will the scenario of the product be investigated, but that related to the student/teacher as well. This demands, of course, a complex research design that suits both settings appropriately. Starting from a more quantitative view and proceeding to a more qualitative one, this study will engage different approaches in order to obtain reliable and valid results.

Thus, a particular type of corpora that represents language as produced by learners (Kennedy, 1998) is the now very prominent learner corpora. As a collection of written data produced by language learners who are acquiring a second or foreign language (McEnery & Xiao, 2006), the results of the local learner corpus can be directly integrated into the process of acquisition.

In ideal scenarios, teachers are also researchers who support professional research and work toward solving the theory-practice problem (Elliott, 2001). It is the aim of Discourse Analysis to analyze students' written texts. It has been chosen as a consequent methodology to the initial discourse-oriented corpus-based research for the fact that it covers a variety of areas necessary to analyze the thesis statements of written texts.

According to Trappes-Lomax (2006) discourse analysts do what people in their everyday experience of language do instinctively and largely unconsciously: notice the patterning of language in use and the circumstances (participants, situations, purposes, outcomes) with which these are typically associated. Roughly speaking, it

refers to attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause and, therefore, to study larger linguistic units, such as written texts.

It is the particular problems or dilemmas raised by Methodological Research that are systematically addressed by means of Discourse Analysis in order to improve an unsatisfactory state or situation.

Insights gained from learner corpus research have huge potential for academic discourse research. However, the overwhelming majority of corpus-based academic discourse studies are exclusively based on native corpora. Analyses of L2 learners are not absent, but they tend to focus on the writing process rather than the writing product.

There are many pressures that are pulling research and teaching apart. Britten (2002), for example, states that "the twentieth century saw the university change from a site in which teaching and research stood in a reasonably comfortable relationship with each other to one in which they became mutually antagonistic" (p. 157).

However, learner corpus (in contrast to other types) requires a different methodological approach which is realistic to the students' purposes, achievable to the students' abilities and acceptable to the teachers of those institutions (Hüttner, 2007). Hammond (1992) proposed a three-phased-wheel model of a teaching-learning cycle which comprises modeling, joint negotiation of text and independent construction of text. Hyland (2004) also emphasizes the advantages of this approach to teaching by naming them as being explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical and conscious-rising.

Putting greater emphasis on actively engaging students and teachers with research suitably adapted to recognize the variation and complexity of constructing knowledge in different disciplines is one way of re-linking them in this century.

Thus, any learner-based corpus study would indirectly have indications for syllable and course material development.

This paper is part of a doctoral thesis research conducted on the structure, position and nature of thesis statements of argumentative essays. However, this paper focuses only on potential differences occurring on the use of thesis statements at different stages. The aim of this paper is to examine the importance of learner corpora in identifying students' needs in order to precise methodological interventions necessary for student success.

## **2. Identification of Research Gap**

Considering the fact that the way we grasp the world is quite rooted in our culture, Kosovar students tend to fail to acquire the complexity of an issue and identify alternative/optional perspectives (Chaffee, 2006). As a result, they produce relatively deficient arguments and face large obstacles in synthesizing grasped information and evaluating/processing them. In these cases, teachers should create learning environments that intellectually challenge learners' thoughts by presenting them how to think rather than what to think (Paul & Willson, 1993). Students should also be brought to the point of experiencing the situation of changing their stand on a particular matter in response to evidence (Browne & Keeley, 2004).

As the researcher of this study has also experienced a traditional way of learning and has been imposed on how to think and act, it is crucial to work on research that proposes to investigate and confront students' barriers in academic discourse. Encountering graduate high school students' deficiency in structuring texts, synthesizing ideas and thinking independently (providing warranted arguments) asks for investigation, confrontation and evaluation of certain data.

The researcher's analysis of students' writings before and after indirect methodological input will be of extensive relevance to the reliable and original nature of the research and resulting data. These findings aim to contribute to the teaching and educational

setting and, ergo, actively prepare students for a critically and intellectually rich environment which shall change the approach to academic writing to a qualitative one.

Because of numerous differences in socio-cultural, historical and educational spheres, there is a constant demand for research in the field of academic discourse, particularly in the setting of Kosova.

### **3. Research Objectives and Questions**

- To create original learner corpora relevant to discourse analysis in the process of linguistic research
- To improve students' performance in argumentation (more specifically, thesis statement) after an indirect instruction of argumentative writing (which included introducing argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions) during the first semester
- To evidence progress in student writings (thesis statement composition) of different stages after an indirect instruction of argumentative writing (introducing argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions)

Q.1: How relevant is the creation of original learner corpora for discourse analysis in the process of linguistic research?

Q.2: Does indirect instruction of argumentative genre (which includes introducing argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions) lead to the development of good argumentation/ thesis statement composition in written texts?

Q.3: Does indirect instruction of argumentative writings (introducing argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions) lead to progress in student writings (thesis statement composition)?

### **4. The Study**

The aim of the study was to discover the progress of students' writings (thesis statement composition) after being exposed to argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions throughout the first semester of their studies.

#### *4.1. Course Background*

The English Language 1 course is a mandatory course for all first-year students at the English Department of the University of Prishtina, Kosova. The aim of the course is to enable students to communicate more effectively in an academic context (in preparation for further university studies), with a particular focus on reading, listening, speaking and writing.

#### *4.2. Participants' Background*

The study was conducted with 43 freshmen students aged 17-18. They were enrolled in a four-year high school program and were homogenous in their educational and cultural background and had no previous experience in conversing argumentatively. So far, they have studied English for eight years; their education was characterized by limited resources, large classes, obedience to authority and rote learning.

#### *4.3. Data Collection and Procedure*

Case study data were primarily collected through the analysis of two essays written at the beginning and at the end of the semester, respectively, notes taken during class discussions and a final focus group.

##### *4.3.1. Essay Assignment*

43 students from two different groups (22 in the first and 21 in the second) were given a short essay assignment at the beginning of the semester with the topic "Should Marihuana be legalized?". Having in mind the examination-oriented practice at high schools in Kosova, the researcher evaluated the writings of a minimum of 250 words each after a time scale of 40 minutes given to the students. This type of assignment had been experienced several times during their studies. The essays were evaluated using a simple essay evaluation rubric. At the end of the semester, the same students were given a second essay assignment with the topic "Do people who commit heinous crimes deserve the death penalty?". The conditions set and analysis comply with that of the first assignment mentioned above.

Table 1. Argumentative essay evaluation rubric

Criteria	4	3	2	1	Grade
<b>Focus &amp; Structure</b>	The essay maintains a clear, relevant and logical organization. The essay is organized into multiple sections that creatively and intelligently build up to support a unique and complex argument.	The essay maintains a clear, relevant and logical organization. Multiple sections (groups of paragraphs) work together to form an argument.	The essay maintains a mostly clear and logical organization. Simple paragraphs are used (rather than multiple sections).	The essay does not maintain a clear and logical organization. Simple paragraphs are used in a disorganized manner.	
<b>Introduction</b>	The introductory section provides a strong opening, context and a complex and original thesis statement. The thesis includes details that preview the rest of the essay.	The introductory section provides a strong opening, context and a thesis statement. The thesis includes details that preview the rest of the essay.	The introductory section provides a strong opening, adequate context and a clear thesis statement.	The introductory section contains some context and an unclear thesis statement.	
<b>Evidence</b>	The student supports the thesis statement with multiple clear and relevant examples from credible sources using quotes	The student supports the thesis statement with multiple clear and relevant examples from credible sources using	The student supports the thesis statement with some clear and relevant examples from credible sources using	Student supports thesis statement with few clear and relevant examples from credible sources using	

	and citations. Evidence acknowledges and refutes alternate or opposing points of view using quotes and citations.	quotes and citations. Evidence acknowledges and refutes alternate or opposing points of view.	quotes and citations. Evidence attempts to acknowledge and refute alternate or opposing points of view but does so unclearly.	quotes and citations. No alternate points are discussed.	
<b>Conclusion</b>	The essay provides a concluding statement that summarizes the major points, explains their significance, and builds new ideas and insights. The conclusion continues to use quotes and sources to support its claims.	The essay provides a concluding statement that summarizes the major points, explains their significance, and builds new ideas and insights.	The essay provides mostly a summary and explanation but offers few new ideas and insights.	The essay provides mostly a summary and offers little explanation and no new ideas and insights.	
<b>Style</b>	Uses strong words, transitional phrases and complex sentences throughout. Grammatical conventions are followed successfully (95% accuracy)	Frequently uses strong words, transitional phrases and complex sentences. Grammatical conventions are usually followed with success (85% accuracy)	Sometimes uses strong words, transitional phrases and complex sentences. Grammatical conventions are sometimes followed (75% accuracy)	Rarely uses strong words, transitional phrases and complex sentences. Grammatical conventions are rarely followed (65% accuracy)	<b>TOTAL SCORE:</b> _____

#### 4.3.2. Indirect Instruction

The teacher-researcher has taught the two groups (group 1 with 22 and group 2 with 21 students) simultaneously during the semester. Having to follow the same syllabus for both groups, the teacher-researcher could apply the slight difference of introducing indirect instruction of argumentative writing to one group and not to the other (in order to observe differences in the final results, their essays). The indirect instruction included introducing argumentative essay samples, free-writing activities and discussions. The argumentative genre activities were conducted with group 1, whereas with group 2 the standard syllabus had been followed.

For the sake of correctness and ethics, all interventions made with Group 1, have later (in the second semester) been presented to Group 2.

#### 4.3.3. Focus Group

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the students' perspective, the researcher conducted a focus group with six participants (three from each group). The discussion took place at a bookshop/café and lasted an hour and fifty minutes. The whole discussion was conducted in English (having some occasional switches to the students' native language, Albanian). With the participants' approval, the discussion was recorded, and notes were taken. The taped discussion was transcribed verbatim, where the names of the students have been changed.

## 5. Findings

The findings from the essay assignments and class notes are aimed at shedding light on the students' production of ideally warranted arguments – thesis statements. The focus group, on the other hand, will provide insight into students' perceptions of the instructional methodology they have gone through so far in their classes.

### 5.1. Essay Assignment

The researcher has evaluated the students' essays by using a simple essay evaluation rubric. For the sake of the research results, the findings from the essay analysis were fortunately in concord with those of the notes taken during the class intervention.

Table 2. Student Argumentation in Essay 1

<b>Occurrence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Inexistent Thesis Statement</b>	Information spread throughout the essay rather than in one statement	84%
<b>Partial Thesis Statement</b>	Position and reasons separated into two different sentences, respectively	15%
<b>Late Thesis Statement</b>	Obvious indications made in one sentence	1%
<b>Inexistent Structure</b>	No organization	72%
<b>Partially Organized Structure</b>	Slight signs of organization	21%
<b>Organized Structure</b>	The essay organized into its constituents	7%
<b>Vague Vocabulary</b>	Unacceptable word choice - informal - vague - subjective - generally unnecessary - generally correct - jargon, cliché, slang, abbreviations	86%
<b>Academic Vocabulary</b>	Proper word choice - formal - objective - advanced - specific	14%

The majority of students (84% in total) have not shown signs of thesis statements in their essays. Those who have provided signals of thesis statements in their writings have mostly (15% of the total number) had their statement scattered among different parts of the essay. Only 1% of the students had a thesis statement that was positioned late in the essay. Considering the organizational structure of the essay, there is a similar division of students who have either not had a structure at all or only slight signs of organization. As far as the vocabulary is concerned, the vast majority has used unacceptable, informal and very subjective expressions. Only 14% have shown command over proper word choice.



Table 3. Student Argumentation in Essay 2 (Group 1 – with Indirect Instruction)

<b>Occurrence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Inexistent Thesis Statement</b>	Information spread throughout the essay rather than in one statement	71%
<b>Partial Thesis Statement</b>	Position and reasons separated into two different sentences, respectively	24%
<b>Late Thesis Statement</b>	Obvious indications made in one sentence	5%
<b>Inexistent Structure</b>	No organization	47%
<b>Partially Organized Structure</b>	Slight signs of organization	32%
<b>Organized Structure</b>	The essay organized into its constituents	21%
<b>Vague Vocabulary</b>	Unacceptable word choice - informal - vague - subjective - generally unnecessary - generally correct - jargon, cliché, slang, abbreviations	71%
<b>Academic Vocabulary</b>	Proper word choice - formal - objective - advanced - specific	29%

Table 4. Student Argumentation in Essay 2 (Group 2 – with no Indirect Instruction)

<b>Occurrence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Inexistent Thesis Statement</b>	Information spread throughout the essay rather than in one statement	80%
<b>Partial Thesis Statement</b>	Position and reasons separated into two different sentences, respectively	18%
<b>Late Thesis Statement</b>	Obvious indications made in one sentence	2%
<b>Inexistent Structure</b>	No organization	64%
<b>Partially Organized Structure</b>	Slight signs of organization	25%
<b>Organized Structure</b>	The essay organized into its constituents	31%
<b>Vague Vocabulary</b>	Unacceptable word choice - informal - vague - subjective - generally unnecessary - generally correct - jargon, cliché, slang, abbreviations	79%
<b>Academic Vocabulary</b>	Proper word choice - formal - objective - advanced - specific	21%

Minor differences, nevertheless differences, have been recorded in the second essays of students of group 1. The students of this group (who have experienced indirect argumentative genre instruction) have resulted slightly better in the formulation of thesis statements and essay organization than in their first essays. In all cases, students

have advanced more in the middle level categories than they have in the advanced. This speaks a lot for the precise analysis and results obtained by this research.

Differences in the second essays of students of group 2 have also been recorded. However, students of this group (who have not experienced indirect argumentative genre instruction) have only shown slight progress in their second essays. This improvement is obviously a result of the general skills instructions made according to the course syllabus.

The differences in the results obtained from the second essay among the two groups are nevertheless not immense. The outcome of Group 1 does not vary from that of Group 2 as expected (in extent).

### *5.2. Class Discussions*

More than two thirds of the students failed to construct a thesis statement (argumentative statement) made of synthesized information and instead recalled information in separate statements. Most of the students used certain phrases to show that an indication of the point of the argument is being made ("The point of our position is that ..."). In half of the cases, the thesis statement got lost in time and words after being introduced too late. The majority of the students used obvious and general facts in order to support their position ("Drugs are dangerous ..."). More than half of them presented claims supporting them with personal opinions ("Relaxing with friends is wonderful...").

Conventional wisdom was applied as a reason by one fourth of the respondents ("Time cures all wounds..."). A phenomenon present throughout more than half of the discussions was the use of vague vocabulary ("always", "never", "believe", "need", "feel", "perfect"; including adverbs used as modifiers of verbs).

### *5.3. Focus Group*

The transcripts of the focus group have shown the matters below as pivotal:

- supporting a position
- educational traditions
- linguistic competence

## **6. Discussion**

### *6.1. Supporting a Position*

The biggest challenge students face when it comes to argumentation is the argument itself; or simply saying supporting their own position. This occurrence was mostly present in situations where students used personal convictions, conventional wisdom and vague expressions in order to make their point. It was also Kay (1998) who put forth the importance for students to make sense of the world around them rather than making account only of their own beliefs.

### *6.2. Educational Traditions*

Argumentative discourse is only effective when the conversations are familiar to the community (Hyland, 2009). These familiarities can only be brought closer to students via education. Sticking only to traditional educational approaches will keep L2 students far from L1 perfection. Thus, in the case of academic discourses, genre-specific and inquiry-based approaches result in triggering necessary argumentative features closer to the learner in the best way possible (Hillocks, 2010). An indirect instruction with no specifications and obvious directions has been shown to not be sufficient for the progress of argumentative writing skills.

### *6.3. Linguistic Competence*

One of the most evident occurrences has derived from both discussions and essay analysis, which have again proven to be closely correlated to each other in the means

of argumentation (Krieger, 2005). Concerns with the correct use of vocabulary have taken a great part in structuring warranted arguments into a complete thesis according to changing needs and views seems to be the greatest difficulty for students.

## 7. Conclusion

This study shows how important it is to consider new educational approaches when it comes to second-language academic discourse. Being of a vital nature, introducing argumentative communication early in education aims at a better understanding of the world beyond the students' personal views. The fact that students are aware of these issues and their significance speaks for a positive attitude towards changes, which is a promising stance (as no change could be possible without the students' willingness to do so). Creating an environment challenging for the students and their studies depends a lot on the teachers who refine future teaching practices and viewpoints toward academia.

The originally created learner corpora and the careful analysis made to obtain concrete results might have shown less obvious differences in the two stages of essay evaluation than expected; but have, however, put emphasis on the fact that argumentative genre should be forthrightly and methodologically be integrated into language course syllabi. The inclusion of new methods and materials to enhance argumentative skills can be said to be crucial. Being able to master the composition of a complete thesis statement is even more complex and calls for more precise and delicate preparation and research by educational bodies; the teachers.

The study aspires to encourage teacher-researchers with similar challenges in teaching argumentative discourse to explore both learner and text perceptions so that education can better meet the learners' academic essentials.

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*Words: 5555*

*Characters: 37 448 (21 standard pages)*

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